

Book Reviews

"THE WAY OF WYRD: Tales of an Anglo-Saxon Sorcerer" by Brian Bates. Century Publishing, 1983. £7.95 (pp 208. No index)

"The Way of Wyrd" is the result of one quest and the story of another. It is the story of the quest of Wat Brand, a Christian scribe in the latter days of the 7th century. It is the result of the quest of Brian Bates, a humanistic psychologist in the latter days of the 20th century.

For Brian Bates, the inspiration for his quest can be found in his studies of the Eastern traditions of Zen and Tao. He became convinced that there must once have been a Western tradition which could offer similar opportunities for psychological and spiritual exploration and liberation. His initial search for that forgotten tradition was fruitless, but "then I read Castaneda - sorcery, shamans and magic as a means to self exploration". (Bates, 1984). From this starting point he has traced back the spiritual side of witchcraft to one of its earliest origins, specifically a thousand year old manuscript in the British Museum (ms Harley 585). Analysis of this manuscript, the Lacnunga, has revealed a remarkable way of being in the world, the way of wyrd (pronounced somewhere between "weird" and "word"), and it is this tradition which is represented by Brian Bates in his novel. The central character of the novel is the scribe, Wat Brand, who is imagined to be the original author of the Lacnunga. Sent to investigate the spiritual practices of the Anglo-Saxon pagans, Brand encounters the sorcerer Wulf. It is through Wulf's teachings that Brand (and the reader) are initiated into the way of wyrd.

It's difficult to fully abstract the life-orientation called wyrd, which is, of course, why Brian Bates has chosen to present his findings in the form of a novel instead of a lifeless academic paper. Essential concepts do stand out however. The polarities of Fire and Frost are used in a similar way to the Eastern concept of Yin and Yang. In a physical sense, Fire and Frost occupy an important place in the cosmology of wyrd, but the polarities should be perceived as primarily psychological and mystical.

Wulf's teachings also demonstrate that Fire and Frost are not the only important polarities:

"The worlds . . . depend upon the balance and eternal cycle of night and day, winter and summer, woman and man, weak

and strong, moon and sun, death and life. These forces, and countless others, form the end points of a gigantic web of fibres which covers all worlds. The web is the creation of the forces and its threads, shimmering with power, pass through everything" (p.75)

This web of fibres is central to the concept of wyrd. The web connects everything to everything else, encompassing psychological events as well as physical objects. Thus, any action or event anywhere has consequences throughout the entire web.

"It is a mistake to assume that events far apart in time are thereby separate. All things are connected as in the finest web of a spider. The slightest movement on any thread can be discerned from all points in the web". (p.73)

I have to confess to being irresistibly reminded of the force in the "Star Wars" movies - and, in fact, a subsequent concept in wyrd is that of life-force which can travel along the web and which is described in the preface as a vital energy permeating everything. Perhaps someone will eventually document the teachings of the Jedi for us.

In the meantime, there is much to seize upon in "The Way of Wyrd". In the following passage, for example, I detect an ancient whisper foretelling modern theories of morphogenetic fields, such as that recently put forward by Rupert Sheldrake in his book "A New Science of Life".

"The soul is what gives form, direction and pattern to all things, for it forms a shield-skin around the life-force, enveloping vitality in a recognisable shape. The form of the shield-skin defines the kind of creature we are". (p.97)

When John Rowan reviewed this book for "Human Potential Resources", he pointed out that the language is too modern (Rowan, 1984), which is a valid point. My personal feeling however is that this makes the book slightly more accessible. In fact, my main problem with the book was the occasional hint of spiritual elitism. Wulf has the irritating habit of disparaging "ordinary people", for example:

"This is the fallacy of the ordinary person's view of life". "Omens frighten the ordinary person". (Both on p.74)

"The eyes of an ordinary person are capable of seeing only the most obvious signs of wyrd . . ." (p.114)

Counteracting this, there are other aspects of wyrd that are more egalitarian. As Brian Bates says: "It does emphasise that we are interconnected, that our skin connects us to everyone else rather than separating us from them". (Bates quoted in Shearer, 1983)

In conclusion, "The Way of Wyrd" is both an extremely powerful novel and an unusual and illuminating psychological study. Speaking for myself, I found the final chapter, "A Sorcerer's Soul", to be particularly rewarding - it brings the book to a brilliant and satisfying end. Read it and experience the way of wyrd for yourself.

Mike Harwood

References

- Bates, Brian (1984) "The Sorcerer's Apprentice". Human Potential Resources, 8(1), pp 18-22
- Rowan, John (1984) "In The Court Of The Saxon King: Review of "The Way of Wyrd" by Brian Bates/. Human Potential Resources, 8(1), p 6
- Shearer, Ann (1983) "Wyrd and Weirder" The Guardian, 9/11/83
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A SOCIABLE GOD: A Brief Introduction to a Transcendental Sociology by Ken Wilber. McGraw-Hill 1983

In this book Ken Wilber applies his ideas, which we are now familiar with from his other books (see **Self and Society** for November-December 1983) to the sociology of religion.

He outlines several approaches to religion which are to be found in the literature: primitivization theory, where religion is regarded as a throwback to earlier and less adequate ways of seeing the world; functionalism, where religion is reduced to its external social functions and studied only in those terms; phenomenological hermeneutics, where some form of inside understanding and interpretive engagement is adopted, but where there is ultimately no way of distinguishing the authentic from the less than authentic forms of religious expression; and developmental structuralism, which is Wilber's own approach.

This is the idea of steps, stages or levels or development, which in this book are labelled archaic, magic, mythic, rational, psychic, subtle, causal and Brahman. Wilber wants to say that the rational level, much favoured and looked up to in our society, is in the middle of this series, and that the first three levels are pre-rational, while

the others are genuinely post-rational. this is, of course, the basic contention of all his books.

Wilber makes a useful list of nine different things we might mean by the word "religion":

1. Religion as non-rational engagement
2. Religion as extremely meaningful or integrative engagement
3. Religion as an immortality project
4. Religion as evolutionary growth
5. Religion as fixation/regression
6. Exoteric religion
7. Esoteric religion
8. Legitimate religion
9. Authentic religion

He argues that people disputing about religion or even describing it often hold quite different definitions, and hence are not arguing about the same thing. And his main contention is that there is such a thing as authentic religion, and that there do exist marks or signs to indicate whether a particular religious expression is authentic or not, and in what manner, and to what degree.

He then distinguishes between belief, faith and religious experience, each of these being fuller and more complete than the last.

Using this apparatus, Wilber goes on to examine various new religions of our time, evaluating and comparing them, and showing that they are not all much of a muchness, and occupy very different positions on the spectrum. He gives a set of usable instructions for use in the future when any new cults come along, showing how each of them can be weighed and tested.

This is an essential book for anyone trying to make sense of the world of religion, whether as a student or as a true believer. It is genuinely helpful in sorting out the confusions in this contentious realm. And it lays the stress on personal experience and self-awareness.

John Rowan

MEDITATION: Teach Yourself Books by James Hewitt. Hodder & Stoughton, 1984. 198 pp £2.50

AHP members who meditate may well already have this superb short book which was originally published in 1978. It nonetheless merits

a brief review to introduce meditation to those who may be considering the possibility of practising it, and wish to know how they can decide which of the many methods to choose. The excellence of James Hewitt's approach is partly due to the comprehensive descriptions he gives of all the main traditions, and also because he writes about each with clarity and empathy.

It is only on reaching the end of the book that an admission as to his own present favoured methods is made, yet the knowledgeable and appreciative way in which he writes about the others conveys confidence in his judgement and accuracy of presentation. Although no autobiographical flavour marks his discussion, it is interesting to note that he has had a full and varied life, working as a warden of a hostel for blind people, as a research worker for the Foreign Office, and as a journalist and author of varied texts, including another in the series called **Yoga**.

He firstly distinguishes between meditation practised to obtain mystical consciousness and that used for relaxation and health, illustrating the beliefs and methods of all the world religions, and quoting from medical journals with regard to therapeutic benefits. He gives basic instruction for all simple meditation, and then devotes separate chapters, each sub-divided to describe the work of special schools, to the main general methods. The first is the Awareness, Counting, Following and Mindfulness of Breathing; Visual and Listening Meditation follow; then there is the Union or Self-Stripping Game, the Way of Love, and the Saying of the Word; finally he has a section on the combining of methods. These broad headings in fact cover everything from Transcendental Meditation to all the Eastern usage of kasinas, mandalas, mantras, yantras, nembutsus, koans, etc. etc. and the writer's deep understanding of the root meanings of both esoteric and exoteric terms is paralleled by his knowledge of both the classic and less familiar mystical texts of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths.

I learned of many ways of meditating which are new to me, the visualisation of Crystalline water being especially attractive as one pictures cool pure water enveloping and dissolving and bathing and cleansing and refining the self. Then one's inner eye watches the water flow away and sometimes only a consciousness of God, the Atman, the essence of being may remain.

A brief review cannot do justice to the wealth of information in this comprehensive little book, but there is one caveat. Despite all the careful detail he gives to describing the many differing forms of

breathing which some meditation methods demand, he does not give sufficient warning of the danger to people trying to undertake these without expert teaching, and without checking their own medical condition. Just as we are mercifully realising that drugs rarely have the same effects on people, but vary with individual body chemistry, so also most meditators find through trial and error which methods suit them best. It is fun to experiment and enlarge one's experiences, but it is wisest to start with simple, basic forms and leave the 'heavy breathing' till later.

Joan Conway

THE WOMEN'S ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF MYTHS AND SECRETS by
Barbara G. Walker. Harper & Row =983 pp.1124 \$19.95

This is a startling book, a feminist mythology, overturning many received ideas. To read even a part of it is to realise how biased, limited, provincial and patriarchal are most of the books in this area.

The Goddess came first. As in several other recent books, Walker makes it abundantly obvious that most of the stories about gods are later reflections of earlier accounts of goddesses.

Apparently this book took 25 years to put together, and it is the most complete version yet assembled of the whole way in which the male takeover distorted the original Goddess-worship in two ways: first by rejecting the goddesses as demons and devils; and second, by transforming goddesses into gods and saints.

A good example of the former is Kali Ma. Kali Ma is the Triple Goddess of creation, preservation and destruction. Kali was the basic archetypal image of the birth-and-death Mother, simultaneously womb and tomb, giver of life and devourer of her children. It was Kali Ma who originally spoke the sacred work OM, the Word of Creation: it was an invocation of her own pregnant belly. In the Nirvana Tantra it is said:

Compared with the vast sea of the being of Kali, the existence of Brahma and the other gods is nothing but such a little water as is contained in the hollow made by a cow's hoof.

The Yogini Tantra said of Kali - "Whatever power anything possesses, that is the Goddess". Shakti, or Power, was one of her important names. Without Shakti, neither man nor god could act at all. Every-

thing to do with creation and generation and birth is essentially contributed by her. The Yoginihrdaya Tantra said:

Obeissance to Her who is pure Being-Consciousness-Bliss, as Power, who exists in the form of Time and Space and all that is therein, and who is the radiant Illumination in all beings.

As a Mother, Kali was called Treasure-House of Compassion (Karuna), Giver of Life to the world, the Life of all lives. Contrary to the west's idea of her as a purely destructive goddess, she was the fount of every kind of love, which flowed into the world only through her agents on earth, women. Thus it was said a male worshipper of Kali "bows down at the feet of women", regarding them as his rightful teachers.

And so it goes on. There is much more, just on this one (triple) goddess. But what a shock for anyone reared in the ordinary patriarchal tradition, as expressed in a cheap and cheerful way, for example, in **Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom**, where the heroine is (almost) sacrificed to Kali, a terrifying image of destructive force. In reality, women were never sacrificed to Kali, who protected and loved women. We can easily dismiss the film as a travesty, but scholars like Neumann (in **The Great Mother**) and Lederer (in **The Fear of Women**) show almost equal horror and incomprehension, thus betraying their inbuilt patriarchal prejudices just as clearly.

Entry after entry in this book tears away old interpretations and substitutes new ones, restoring the glories of the Goddess and her worship. It is an angry book, too, having no mercy on the falsifications, distortions and suppressions of the patriarchal takeover. It is particularly hard on Christianity, and devotes much space to drawing out the anti-Goddess and anti-woman practices of Christians down the ages. Jesus Christ himself is dismissed as purely mythical.

As with most books, what is said positively is perhaps more useful and usable than what is said negatively. And for anyone who wants to know more about the female principle (as distinct from the feminine), this book is a storehouse, a treasure-trove. For example, the entry for **Cunt**, a word often found offensive, and indeed often used offensively, shows that originally it derived from the Great Goddess considered as Yoni of the Universe. From the same root comes the word "kin", which meant not only matrilineal blood relations, but also a cleft or crevice, the Goddess's genital opening. A Saharan tribe called Kuntahs traced their descent from this holy place. Indian "kundas" were their mothers' natural children, begotten out of wedlock as gifts of the Goddess.

This is an absorbing book, full of information which is very hard to find anywhere else. Some of the entries are quite long, forming quite considerable essays on the subject: for example, the entry on Alchemy takes up three pages; on Asceticism three and a half; on the Bible five pages; on Cannibalism four pages; on Castration six pages; on the Devil seven pages; on Dog seven pages; and so on. Some of the entries are very short, such as for example - MAHATMA: Hindu sage, a word literally meaning "Great Mother", masculinized in much the same way as the Semitic *ima*, "mother", became *imam*, a male sage. The original **mahatmas** were the Primal Matriarchs, or **matrikadevis**.

Each statement is backed by references to the literature, and there is a huge bibliography, plus many other references to books in the margins, which also contain other fascinating notes.

This is a great book in every sense, which should be on the shelf of anyone interested in feminist thinking.

John Rowan

RECLAIM THE EARTH - Women Speak Out For Life On Earth - Leonie Caldecott & Stephanie Leland (eds) - The Women's Press.

This is a powerful collection of essays and some poems - powerful both in content and in presentation. I like the way each essay is introduced by the editors, putting its content into context and thereby signifying its importance

The essays cover a wide variety of present day political, environmental and just basically relevant issues from a feminist viewpoint, but also what appears to be that of truth and fact. It is uncluttered, unemotionally, unsentimentally informative; yet presented with feeling. These facts are presented strongly and clearly in plain and often painfully truthful language. Certainly they give an insight into how we are kept uninformed and why; and how to go about finding out more. Also a reassurance that much is being done, by women, a) to find and clarify the truth about what is happening to life on our planet and b) to support that life.

In particular I found 'Unholy Secrets - The Impact of the Nuclear Age on Public Health' by Rosalie Bertell horrifying enough for me to be almost unreadable. She writes explicitly, exposing the grisly 'new reality' and concludes that "The only course now offering a viable future is the total renunciation of war-making as human behaviour. Just as cannibalism, slavery and duelling, though once entrenched in human social patterns, are

now totally unacceptable behaviour . . . Alternative methods of resolving differences between nations can and must be implemented".

And on the same subject, war, Stephanie Leland in 'Feminism & Ecology: Theoretical Connections' writes, "Without an enemy, there is no war". She goes on to show how, "This concept of the enemy", is used to "conceal deep rooted corruption", in looking truthfully at the use of, "power in the hands of the few", and the use of that power to maintain those positions of power. She makes the connection with the patriarchal separation from nature, the earth seen as object and therefore, "that which should be subdued, controlled, dominated". Here is shown yet another face of the truth; another supposed enemy.

I can only quote Wilmette Brown's quote in 'Roots: Black Ghetto Ecology' from 'Pay Women Not The Military'. "The money required to provide food, water, adequate education, health and housing for everyone in the world has been estimated at \$17 billion a year. It is a huge sum of money . . . about as much as the world spends on arms every two weeks". She writes about her own experience with cancer as a black woman. I would echo her words, "Cancer epitomises the crisis of health in our time . . . The military-industrial complex depends on the working class being healthy enough to work - not healthy enough to be whole". I had never thought about it quite that way; but it makes sense to me. She goes on to examine the work that women have done for love and again quotes, this time from 'All Work & No Pay', "But the cost of loving is going up". It must be if cancer is the result. Cancer certainly features in more than one essay in this book.

I pick up here Leonie Caldecott's statement in 'The Land Is Our Life -A Pacific Experience', about the experience of the people of the Micronesian Islands administered by the US under assignation of the United Nations a "Strategic Trust Territory" but are in fact taken over by the US and used for testing long-range missiles. "Instead of doing things to serve one another, we do them for money". The story goes on about the island schoolchildren fed on imported American junk food.

And so the book goes on. A poem on P.111 about a Micronesian woman's baby, born without a face, its father the atom bomb. A more peaceful look at 'Gaea: The Earth As Our Spiritual Heritage' by Jean Freer answers my question, that surely to change all this we must change ourselves, individually. "Once we are emanating from our own centres we can begin to create meaningful relationships in our lives". "Supporting life in our daily practices . . . to create meaning in our existence". A contribution from Maori women advises us to, "Find hope in the wisdom of the past". Chris Thomas's contribution on 'Alternative Technology' also answers for me the question about feminism and change. Is this book asking us to change from

masculism to feminism, no, I think not, Chris Thomas asks, not that we make technology less masculine but, "More completely human". This seems to me, adding the feminine principle, not removing the masculine. What I feel is lacking here is a representation from Humanistic Psychology or the value of therapy in finding our complete humanness - although there is reference to women and healing. I do believe that it is the feminine principle which is the agent of healing which brings wholeness.

By chapter 27 I had lost my initial excitement and was feeling numbed, looking at subject after subject, there seems so much to cover, so much for women to care and be concerned about. But Chapter 27 summed up in, 'Personal, Political and Planetary Play&', by Lin Simonon what it is all about, "We are now in a painful transition time". And the last chapter by Hazel Henderson, subtitled 'The Coming Synthesis of Eco-Philosophy and Eco-Feminism', gives me hope with its Post Cartesian Science and New World Order, which I have read about and been told in many ways now. Somehow she makes sense of the fact that chaos reigns and shows how this is necessary, that, "certainty, equilibrium, predictability and control is a good definition of death". On this happy note the book ends with a poem which brings me back to the thread connecting these women's stories, that despair is real, and now. So is this book.

Wendy Freebourne

DEPRESSION: The Way out of your Prison by Dorothy Rowe. Routledge & Regan Paul. 1983. £3.95 pp 142.

There is a common theme which runs through images and symbols of people suffering from depression and that is the feeling of isolation. Dorothy Rowe says of it: "Depression is a prison where you are both the suffering prisoner and the cruel jailer.

The author has worked extensively with depressed people and has found that to build your prison of depression you must have the following set of deeply held conviction about life.

1. No matter how good and nice I appear to be, I am really bad, evil, valueless, unacceptable to myself and other people.
2. Other people are such that I must fear, hate and envy them.
3. Life is terrible and death is worse.
4. Only bad things happened to me in the past and only bad things will happen to me in the future.
5. It is wrong to get angry.
6. I must never forgive anyone, least of all myself.

In a lengthy chapter called "How to build your prison" she looks into these attitudes in detail, a part of the book I found very moving to read. She goes on to look at why the prison is often seen as more attractive than freedom. There's a chapter about living with someone who's depressed, followed by an interesting chapter on the steps you need to take in order to gain your freedom, if you want it.

I feel this is a very valuable book for anyone suffering from depression as it contains some very useful self-help exercises and ways of being kind to yourself. After all, if you still refuse to leave the prison of depression you've created for yourself, you could at least make the jailer more friendly.

This is a sensitively written book which gives the reader a very accurate insight into what being depressed is really like.

Suzanne Michaud

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